

Bush urges Congress to negotiate on SCHIP

By NOELLE STRAUB - Lee Washington Bureau - 09/21/07 – Helena Independent Record

WASHINGTON — Trying to wrest control of the debate over renewing the State Children's Health Insurance Program, President Bush on Thursday urged Congress to temporarily extend current law and keep negotiating with him rather than pass a bill he will veto.

Bush, who opposes expanding the program, called the proposed legislation a first step toward "government-run health care for every American." But Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., who took the lead on shaping the bill, called the president's comments "absurd" and "factually incorrect."

The battle over SCHIP is intensifying leading up to its expiration date of Sept. 30. Congress next week likely will pass legislation extending and modifying the program, but Bush has vowed to veto it.

House Democratic leaders, whose version of the bill was more expansive than the Senate's, have agreed to push through a bill similar to the Senate's in order to have a final bill to Bush by the deadline.

Bush wants to increase SCHIP funding by \$5 billion over five years, but the measure likely to reach his desk would raise it by \$35 billion. That would be paid for largely by a 61-cent tax increase per pack on cigarettes, which Bush opposes.

"Unfortunately, instead of working with the administration to enact this funding increase for children's health, Democrats in Congress have decided to pass a bill they know that will be vetoed," Bush said at a press conference.

He added that "members of Congress are putting health coverage for poor children at risk so they can score political points in Washington."

Bush claimed the proposal would move millions of children with private health insurance into "government-run health care." The administration wants to limit coverage to households under 200 percent of the poverty line, an annual income of about \$34,000 for a family of three.

"Instead of expanding SCHIP beyond its original purpose, we should return it to its original focus, and that is helping poor children, those who are most in need," he said.

Bush claimed the bill would cover children in families making up to \$83,000 a year, which lawmakers of both parties noted is not true.

His comments drew angry reactions from Democrats and some Republicans.

"I thought they were absurd, because it couldn't be farther from the truth," Baucus said in a phone interview. "He's playing politics with our kids. It's not factual."

SCHIP has been strongly supported by governors and members of Congress from both parties, Baucus noted. The Senate bill passed by the veto-proof margin of 68-31. Baucus said the goal is not to expand government health care but build upon an existing popular program to help kids.

Top Finance Committee Republican Charles Grassley of Iowa also had a strong reaction to Bush's words.

"The statement shows a miserable lack of understanding of what we're doing and even what his own administration has done," Grassley told National Journal, a Washington publication.

Grassley particularly objected to Bush's claim that the bill would cover children in households with incomes up to \$83,000 per year. The Senate bill would not cover incomes that high. That figure refers to a request by New York earlier this year to expand to 400 percent of poverty - which the administration rejected.

“His understanding of our bill is wrong, and I would urge the president to reconsider his veto message,” Grassley said.

Baucus said the new measure would simply extend current law with a lower reimbursement rate applying over 300 percent of poverty.

“The president’s objections are factually incorrect,” he said.

Currently each state can set its own eligibility limits. The 2007 Montana Legislature increased the family cutoff from 150 percent of the federal poverty level to 175 percent.

The new bill focuses solely on SCHIP, while the administration wants to continue negotiations to add “everything but the kitchen sink,” Baucus said. Bush wants Congress to consider health care tax proposals as part of the bill.

“He’s just wrong,” Baucus said. “He’s playing politics. It’s very disappointing that the president is not wanting to help low-income kids.”

As for sending Bush a bill he will veto, Baucus said he remains hopeful that despite the rhetoric Bush will sign the measure. If he doesn’t, Baucus said he expects to override the veto.

SCHIP is a federal-state program to help children whose families don’t qualify for Medicaid but cannot afford private health insurance to get coverage. Any SCHIP funding increase would be on top of the \$25 billion now available over five years.

Lawmakers said the Senate bill would add 3.3 million kids to the program, bringing the total covered to 9.9 million. In Montana it would add more than 12,000 kids and keep the 14,000, Baucus said. He has said that under Bush’s \$5 billion plan roughly 3,600 Montana kids would lose coverage.

Bush said one million children could lose coverage if SCHIP is allowed to expire. He wants Congress to pass a simple extension of the program and continue negotiations with the White House.

Instead, House and Senate negotiators are working quickly to come up with a compromise that resembles the Senate’s bill. The House is expected to take up the new measure on Tuesday, with the Senate following suit.